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Seven Roads and Seven Realities under an Ecumenical Rainbow

After completing the Master of Ecumenical Studies program at Bossey in 2001, at the tender age of 71, I have been eager to tell the story of the quest for Christian unity. As I travel to various congregations and conferences, especially in my native California but also in other parts of the United States, my wife admonishes me to remember that most people know little about the ecumenical movement and are not terribly interested. Therefore, she says, try to make it interesting and tell them why it is important.

Thus, I want to describe seven "roads" to unity that have been proposed by various Christian communions and movements, while also lifting up seven New Testament realities that indicate what all Christians have in common. In another desperate effort to be creative, I would like to borrow an illustration about our unity-in-diversity by suggesting that each Christian tradition could be described as a color of an "ecumenical rainbow." But first, allow me to follow the good counsel of my spouse, Judy, and make a case for the importance of all of this.

AN ANECDOTE ABOUT A GOLD MEDALLION

A story about the concluding session of the Second Vatican Council has been told with "tongue-in-cheek." The Protestant observers wanted to express their appreciation for being invited to this event that is still regarded as an ecumenical milestone. They had a gold medallion struck, so the story goes, bearing the portraits of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI on one side. When the Protestant scholars presented this medallion to each bishop and cardinal as they descended the steps of St. Peter's, the Catholic dignitaries were very pleased. But when they turned the medallions over, so the story goes, they were stunned to see a portrait of Martin Luther. To add insult to injury, they read with dismay the words in Latin encircling Luther's head. Here is a loose translation in English: "In Your Heart You Know He's Right."

Of course, the veracity of the story is in doubt, but the point is very compelling. For centuries, we Christians have displayed this kind of arrogance toward each other. We have claimed that we are right and our opponents are wrong. We are reminded of our need to move from arrogance to tolerance, and on to

convergence, consensus and communion. We must realize and celebrate the new ecumenical climate that has exchanged polemics for irenics by replacing diatribe with dialogue.

HANS KÜNG AND WORLD PEACE

In case the prospect of bringing together the confessional families in a more harmonious relationship does not sound too relevant in today's world of political strife, upheaval and war, a statement by Hans KÜNG may provide a fresh perspective. He writes:

"There will be no peace among the peoples of this world without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the world religions without peace among the Christian Churches." (*Christianity and the World Religions: Paths to Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism*, p. 443) I would like to suggest that our ecumenical efforts are a contribution to world peace.

OUR LORD'S PRAYERFUL MANDATE FOR MISSION

The Sacerdotal Prayer of our Lord in John 17 is often cited as a Biblical basis for Christian unity. What is easily overlooked is that there is a mission dimension to this prayer. Jesus prays "... that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in You, may they also be in us..." And then he reveals the purpose of this unity: "... so that the world may believe...."

In an agnostic world that has been turned off by religion, our visible and audible unity in Christ is more likely to bridge the credibility gap. Hopefully, skeptics will be able to say of us once again, "Behold how they love one another," and will be drawn into our imperfect but forgiven fellowship.

SEVEN ROADS TO UNITY

A stranger drives into a town and asks how to get to the city hall. A resident attempts to give directions, becomes confused, and says, "You cannot get there from here!" It would seem that this is also our frustration as we try to find our way to the ecumenical goal. But it is helpful to review what various Christian traditions have proposed as a "road" to unity. I will identify seven ecumenical roads.



SEVEN ECUMENICAL REALITIES

While each of the seven roads identified above has led to a measure of unity among divided Christians, and continues to indicate potential possibilities for realizing the emerging ecumenical goal of *koinonia* in the future, a passage in the New Testament points to seven ecumenical realities in the present. We are only too familiar with Ephesians 4,4-6 that affirms “one body,” “one Spirit,” “one hope,” “one Lord,” “one faith,” “one baptism,” “one God and Father of all.” A fresh ecumenical interpretation of this text suggests that these seven realities can be seen as the seven things that all Christians have in common.

Even though there are many separate denominations, churches and ecclesial entities – as well as polarized groupings within each communion – there is ultimately *one body* of Christ. We are the diverse members, and Christ is the head.

There are many pneumatologies and many experiences and expressions of the work of the Holy Spirit. Worship styles, for example, range “from screaming to incense” (in the unpublished words of Jaroslav PELIKAN). One rapidly growing branch of Christianity is the Pentecostal movement, focusing heavily on the reality of the Holy Spirit. But all of us trace our Christian origins to that first Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, and are united in the *one Spirit*.

During the debates of the Evanston Assembly in 1954, there was a clash between European and North American theologians regarding eschatology. The former emphasized the “not yet,” and the latter the “here and now.” But the *one hope* of Ephesians 4 was articulated in the received Message that includes the words that I have quoted at numerous funeral services: “We do not know what is coming to us. But we know Who is coming. It is He who meets us every day and Who will meet us at the end – Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore, we say to you: Rejoice in hope.”

There are many charismatic leaders among the churches. There is the debate about papal primacy and the essential role of bishops for assuring continuity in the “faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3), as opposed to the authority of the local congregation. But we are reminded in the Ephesians text that there is *one Lord*. It is the Lord Who shepherds the one flock, not in an authoritarian way, but authoritatively and lovingly.

Although the Stockholm Life and Work conference of 1925 declared, “Doctrine divides and service unites,” it is the Faith and Order movement that has achieved a convergence on issues like Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (see the Lima text of 1982). Our divisions over dogma are transcended by *one faith*, a reality that is more than intellectual or cerebral. It is relational.

Someone has jokingly said that the difference between Baptists and other Christians is 250 gallons of water. It is significant that Baptists and Eastern Orthodox who find themselves on opposite ends of the liturgical spectrum choose to immerse their baptismal candidates, while others apply the water by sprinkling or pouring. But although the mode of baptism differs and the interpretations vary in emphasis, the ultimate reality of its

meaning and the mutual recognition of this sacrament by most churches – when administered with water in the name of the Triune God – enable us to recognize our unity in *one baptism*.

There are many theologies among the churches and many approaches to God among the religions of the world. But as Christians of all persuasions join together in the prayer taught to us by our Lord, we are bound together by an ultimate reality: the *one God and Father of all*.

UNDER AN ECUMENICAL RAINBOW

A dramatic illustration of our catholicity as Christians has been proposed by Vernard ELLER, former professor at LaVerne College in Southern California. He suggested that we identify the major and minor Christian traditions by designating to them colors of the spectrum (*COCU: Self-Defeating?* The Christian Century, 1966, 488ff). This is a paraphrased summary of ELLER’s ecumenical rainbow:

Violet (Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox), *Indigo* (Anglican and Episcopal), *Blue* (Lutheran, Presbyterian and other churches of the Reformation), *Green* (Methodist, Congregational, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ), *Yellow* (Baptist, Brethren and Mennonite), *Orange* (Society of Friends – Quakers, Salvation Army [both have no sacraments]), *Red* (non-denominational movements that emphasize personal spiritual experience, eg. the Charismatic movement that exists within denominations and outside of them).

As we contemplate this colorful ecumenical rainbow, how can we realize our unity, with all of its catholic breadth and theological depth? We need to trace these seven colors to their one source. The violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange, and red of our various Christian expressions find their origin in Christ Who is the Light of the world. This one Light has been refracted through the prism of Scripture and Tradition so that it can now be seen in all its beauty and diversity in the people of God, who have been led to express their faith and to order their structures in a variety of ways, reflecting the Light of Christ in a common mission to the world.

Hopefully, this physical analogy will help us to grasp and celebrate the possibility of our oneness in Christ and our *koinonia* in the one Triune God. How do we get there from here? We travel down various confessional and historical roads, moving *through Rome, through Constantinople, through Augsburg, through Canterbury, through Geneva, through Antioch, through Amsterdam* (and let us add *through Aldersgate* for a heart “strangely warmed”), *to Jerusalem* where Christ not only prayed that we would all be one, but died and rose for us in order to reconcile us and the world to God through His cross-shaped love. On our ecumenical pilgrimage, we also take seriously the seven New Testament realities (the *Ephesian Septilateral?*), realizing what we all already have in common and discovering our unity in diversity and our unity in mission under an ecumenical rainbow.



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